The Evolution of the British Public Service Ethos: A Historical Institutional Approach in explaining Change

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1. Introduction

An important aspect of the British Home Civil Service throughout its history is the continuous presence of the Public Service Ethos (PSE). It has been the value-based foundation of the Home Civil Service throughout history. Woodhouse (1997) describes PSE as 'an amalgam of beliefs and norms or conventions of behaviour [concerning public service]'. This ethos serves as an ethical core or code for civil servants and officials (Greenaway 1995;Farnham and Horton 1996a, O'Toole 1997, 2000) Next to this guidance function, it also has a motivational aspect (Livingstone & Wilkie 1981; Chapman 1997; House of Lords 1998; Chapman 2000; House of Commons 2002;Reeves 2004; Sillett 2002) In this respect there is a resemblance to the concept of public service motivation as described by Perry (1996) and others [1]. Although some authors contest the idea of PSE (Kemp cited in Chapman 1997:26), it is a generally accepted concept in British administration, both for senior and junior civil servants. It is also politically neutral, as it is defended by all the major political parties in the UK (Richards & Smith 1998).

2. Main research question

The aims of this research paper are twofold. First, to investigate the emergence of PSE throughout modern history and to assess its current status. Second, to explain variations in the content of PSE by embedding it in a historical- institutional theoretical framework.

3. Historical institutionalism as a theoretical framework

Historical institutionalist theory offers an interesting framework within which to analyse PSE. Having close links with comparative politics (Steinmo & Thelen 1995) and comparative historical analysis (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer 2003), it provides interesting opportunities to fit distinctive cases into a general theoretical framework.

It is a variant of new institutionalism (Hall & Taylor 1996; Peters 2000) and institutions are the main building blocks of the theory. Peters (2000:18) defines an institution as ' a formal or informal, structural, societal or political phenomenon that transcends the individual level, that is based on more or less common values, has a certain degree of stability and influences behaviour'. In this paper, we are interested in how institutions are created, changed and why they persist.

The historical component is often neglected, compared to other explanatory variables, (Sewel in Pierson 2000a) but 'history matters'. A steady stream of research has been generated by scholars who have devoted attention to this historical component of social sciences (Hall

[1] For an overview of research on Public Service Motivation, see Vandenabeele et al (2004)

1986; Collier & Collier 1991;Steinmo & Thelen 1995;Pierson 2000b). Based on ideas introduced from economics, historical sociology and comparative politics, these scholars have contributed to the development of a historical, institutionalist framework in order to explain the persistence of institutions. A common concept in the work of historical institutionalists is 'path dependency' or, as Peters (2000) puts it, 'the legacy of the past', as they focus on the consequences of earlier events for later events.

Path dependent explanations have two common features (Pierson 2000 a; Thelen 2003). First, a contingent event puts a causal chain in motion. Second, this causal chain is relatively deterministic. Because of these features, path dependent processes demonstrate particular characteristics (Thelen 2003). First, path dependent processes are rather unpredictable. Because early events are contingent events[2], many outcomes are possible. Second, early events have a greater impact than later events. Third, path dependent processes demonstrate inertia. The further a certain path has evolved, the more difficult it is to leave this option. Fourth, contingent events cannot be cancelled out by later events.

Much of the work on historical institutionalism concentrates on how institutions survive (Thelen 2003). According to historical institutional theory, this is due to self-reinforcing mechanisms. These mechanisms can be interpreted in economic terms, where they are operationalised as 'increasing returns'. Once a process has been initiated, it demonstrates cost-benefits because of co-ordination effects, diminishing marginal costs, learning effects or adaptive expectations. Therefore, a process is reproduced and delivers increasing returns (Pierson 2000a). This type of mechanism applies not only to economic environments, but also to social environments (Pierson 2000b). Thelen (1999) sums these mechanisms up under the heading of positive feedback mechanisms (a term created by Krasner (1984) causing institutions to reproduce themselves and to demonstrate path dependency).

Mahoney (2000) has identified additional positive feedback mechanisms to the utilitarian mechanism including functional, power and legitimation mechanisms. A functional mechanism reproduces an institution because the latter serves a function for an overall system. A power mechanism reproduces an institution because it is supported by an elite group of actors. Finally, a legitimation mechanism reproduces an institution because actors think it is appropriate. Just as in the 'increasing returns' case, institutions not only reproduce they also capitalise on the reproduction, causing self-reinforcement (Pierson 2000 a; Mahoney

[2] Contingent events are events that are random or unexpected (e.g. the murder of Martin Luther King in 1968 caused a chain of events influencing the situation of the Afro-Americans in the USA; famine in the 1840s caused the Irish to leave Ireland and immigrate to the USA)

2001). These mechanisms demonstrate that various actors are involved in the reproduction process. Whereas all the members are active in reproducing through utilitarian and legitimation mechanisms, only elite members reproduce through power mechanisms, while systems are the main actors in functional reproduction.

Although the positive feedback mechanisms provide an explanation for the persistence of institutions, historical institutionalism appears a less fruitful ground for explaining change (Peters 2000). On closer examination, however, the theory does offer opportunities for explaining change. Krasner (1984) draws an interesting parallel with Darwinism, with institutions demonstrating long periods of stasis, alternating with short outbursts of change. He describes this evolution as a series of punctuated equilibria, with the institution existing most of its time in an equilibrium state due to positive feedback mechanisms. Sometimes, however, critical junctures occur, causing rapid change in the institutional make up (Hall & Taylor 1996; Cortell & Peterson 1999). These critical junctures can cause both institutional formation and institutional change.

Critical junctures display two important features when explaining institutional formation. First, they demonstrate contingency (Mahoney 2001). The exogenous character of this contingency is strongly emphasized (Peters 2000, Thelen 2003). Second, they involve a choice between two or more alternatives; otherwise they are just another element of a path dependent chain (Mahoney 2001). However, when critical junctures are applied in a process of change, a third feature should be at hand. Thelen (1999) argues that they should also disrupt the positive feedback mechanisms that are in place.

As we fit this into Mahoney's positive feedback mechanisms (2001), we find possible disruptions for each mechanism. These include increased competitive pressures for the utilitarian mechanism, an exogenous shock that transforms the system's need for the functional mechanism, loss of power by the elite for the power mechanism and a collision with external norms for the legitimation mechanism. Examples of these types of international and domestic critical junctures are: war, changing international balances of power, technological change, macro-economic change, international treaties, revolutions, civil war, elections, economic growth, demographic change or social movements (Hall & Taylor 1996; Cortell & Peterson 1999).

However, this is only a partial explanation of institutional change. Institutions shift shape even without the occurrence of critical junctures (Cortell & Peterson 1999; Thelen 2003). In contrast to rapid and substantial change, there is institutional evolution. When changing in

this incremental manner, institutions do not disrupt the positive feedback mechanisms and they are *de facto* in harmony with their institutional setting. This process of change does not go against previous institutional arrangements. Weir (1995) defines this by the term 'bounded innovation'. Thelen (2003) calls this 'layering' and describes the process in more detail[3]. What happens is that instead of dismantling old institutions and replacing them, additional institutional arrangements are layered on top of existing structures.

4. Methodological issues

In this paper, we use a single case study method. Although it is not a valid method for generalizing empirical data to the population, it is a valid method for judging theoretical propositions on their merits (Yin 1981). Through 'pattern matching', the empirical data and the theoretical framework are laid against each other. This provides an excellent way to look into the causal virtues of the theoretical mechanism. A qualitative case study also provides far more in-depth information on the actual process compared with quantitative methods (Miles & Huberman 1994). An implication of this methodological approach is that an extensive theoretical framework will be constructed. This will not only function as an intertwined set of hypotheses about reality, but will also structure the empirical data, preventing it from becoming a cluttered account of facts.

Our dependent variable is a set of values that is the foundation of the PSE. However, all value-laden elements that point to these values will be considered as an operationalisation of the values. Norms, attitudes and roles are also taken into account in order to provide a maximalist overview of the PSE. Our independent variables are historical processes stated in terms of our theoretical framework. Critical junctures and (disruptions of) positive feed back mechanisms will fulfil a prime role in explaining institutional change and persistence.

The data collection is based on a review of the literature, for both the dependent and the independent variables, including both primary and secondary sources.

5. Historical and constitutional background and general description of the case

Fry (2000) states that today's civil service is itself the provisional end product of three administrative revolutions. The first revolution was the shift in administrative functions from

[3] Thelen adds also another mechanism of evolution, conversion (Thelen 2003). This involves redirection of an existing institution towards other ends. However, as this involves an exogenous cause, we argue that this is more an instance of institutional change, rather that an instance of institutional evolution.

the feudal state to the household of the monarchy during the middle ages. The second revolution was the transition from a patriarchal to a bureaucratic form of administration during the 16th century. The third revolution came in the late 19th century with the creation of the Home Civil Service following the Northcote-Trevelyan Report in 1854 (reproduced in the Fulton Report 1968).

The report was extremely controversial at the time and it took more than 50 years before it was implemented in full but Northcote-Trevelyan, did lay the foundations for what is described as the Westminster ideal of a *politically neutral* civil service with complete *loyalty to the government* of the day regardless of its political/partisan complexion; an *expert* civil service *permanently* staffed on the basis of merit; a *professional* service, offering impartial and courageous advice, *devoted to the public interest* and obedient to the Minister and Cabinet; and a *service* that provides the nation with continuity when government's change.

The process of institutionalising and consolidating this modern civil service began in the 1920s and lasted until the 1960s. During that period the emphasis was on the common characteristics that confirmed the unified nature of the civil service (O'Toole 1997)). A leading role in that process was played by a number of important senior civil servants, including Sir Warren Fisher and Sir Edward, later Lord Bridges (Theakston 1995) who both held the role of Head of the Civil Service (Fisher 1919-1939 and Bridges 1945-1956). The period divides naturally into two- before and after the second world war- as the civil service in the period up to 1939 differs markedly from the civil service after 1945.

By the 1960s the civil service was attracting a lot of criticism (Balogh 1959; Fabian Society1964) and in 1966 the Labour Government appointed a committee of enquiry under Lord Fulton. Although only a small number of Fulton's 158 proposals were implemented in the short term it proved to be a milestone in British administrative history.

Many of the report's proposals were subsequently taken up by the Thatcher and Major governments (1979-1997), which carried through the most radical reform of the civil service since Northcote-Trevelyan. This period marks another evolutionary stage of the Civil Service.

The final period that can be distinguished in the evolution of the civil service is the era following the Nolan-Report in 1995. From that time attention has again focused on the unique features of the Home Civil Service, including the PSE, as academics, parliament, and the government have debated whether the PSE is being threatened by the changes taking place and whether the PSE is still relevant to the civil service in the 21st century.

6. Analysis

From the above overview, one can discern six periods in the evolution of the Home Civil Service:

1. 1854-1920: the evolution of the modern civil service
2. 1920-1940: consolidation of the service
3. 1945-1960: post-war developments after the creation of the welfare interventionist state
4. 1960-1979: civil service under pressure
5. 1979-1997: reform and a shift towards managerialism, agencification, marketisation and contractorisation
6. 1997-present: post Nolan Report and the 'modernised' civil service

The nature and the presence of PSE in each of these periods will now be discussed in more detail and parallel historical processes will be stated in terms of our theoretical framework to explain this dependent variable. This analysis is designed to provide us with ample information on the explanatory value of our theory.

7.1 The evolution of the modern civil service

In 1854 there was a collection of civil offices grouped together into departments of varying sizes. The sale of offices was still common and recruitment was largely by patronage and nomination at the disposal of ministers and members of parliament (MPs) (Parris 1969). Reforms were being demanded and an investigation by Northcote and Trevelyan resulted in their report *The Organisation of the Permanent Civil Service*[4].

The first steps towards implementation of the report were taken with the Order in Council 1855 which created the Civil Service Commission. Not until 1870, however, with Gladstone's Order in Council, was the open competition and merit- based system of entry, advocated by Northcote Trevelyan, finally implemented. Even then the citadels of the *ancien regime*, the Foreign Office and the Home Office, refused to comply (Hennessy 1989:48). The 1870 Order in Council also created the division of the civil service into two classes higher and lower with different examinations for entry into each. By the early 20th century an Oxbridge intellectual elite had emerged (Roseveare 1968) and generalist administrators dominated the higher civil service.

[4] The Northcot Trevelyan Report's four main recommendations were that

- Work should be divided into untellectual and mechanical tasks
- Recruitment into each division ahould be by open competitive examinations conducted by an independent body
- Promotion should be based on merit and reports of superiors
- Mobility between departments should be encouraged to create a unified service

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The PSE was rooted in the idea of the 'English gentleman' and the playing fields of the English public schools. It was characterised by trust, honesty, integrity, mutual respect between politicians and civil servants, not letting down the team and not least an intellectual rigour in presenting and defending arguments. According to Hennessy (1989:60) by 1914 the civil service was 'a convention bound precedent laden, secretive society …. dominated by an administrative elite recruited from an exclusive educated class with a strong *espirit d'corps* and sense of its own importance as servants of the crown, loyal to the government of the day, bound by the Official Secrets Acts (1989,1911) and committed to a career of service'. Fry's (1969) seminal work describes them as 'statesmen in disguise'.

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Various events influenced the Northcote-Trevelyan report's implementation. Initially it was met with great hostility and opposition from vested interests in Parliament (Kellner and Crowther Hunt 1980:) but external events, in the form of the Crimean War, and pressure from the Administrative Reform Association, disrupted the existing power feedback mechanism, by shaking up the existing balance of power, and this enabled its implementation. Further, the growth of staff association throughout the service, which put pressure on the government to standardise terms and conditions of service across departments, disrupted this balance further in favour of reforms. And last but not least the demise of the 'night watchman' state and the rise of the 'social service' state during the era of 'New Liberalism' after 1905 caused an external shock to the functional mechanism and created a context in which a modern bureaucratic civil service became more important and even a necessity. These events not only assisted in the implementation of the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms, but also rooted the PSE more firmly into the civil service institution.

7.2. Post-war consolidation 1920-1940

Following the end of the First World War (1914-18), and the publication and implementation of the Haldane Report (1919) on the reconstruction of government, the principles enshrined in the Northcote-Trevelyan Report were confirmed (Harcourt-Smith 1920). New departments and ministries were established to fulfil post-war needs, based on a functional division of labour (Mackenzie 1957). The civil service was divided into three general classes (later called Treasury classes): a higher class of generalist administrators, an executive class implementing government policy and a clerical class providing clerical support. In addition, new specialist staffs were recruited into separate departmental classes as the functions of the state expanded. This general scheme promoted the unification of the civil service as all departments had the same class structure and there was mobility across departments especially at the

administrative level. . The introduction of Whitleyism[5] in 1919 further assisted the unification of the service, as it was a means of determining general pay and conditions within classes (White 1933; Armstrong 1969:Farnham and Horton 1996a).

Another key development during the interwar years, which consolidated the unified civil service, was the gradual increase of Treasury control. The Treasury, headed by Sir Warren Fisher from 1919 until 1939, had the power to approve expenditure on staff, to set down qualifications for entry and the nature of examinations (although the Civil Service Commissioners continued to be responsible for recruitment), and to coordinate and control the work of all departmental establishments (Farnham and Horton 1996a). This enabled Fisher to impose his ideas on the civil service (Pilkington 1999), which had grown from 55,000 in 1910 to 163,000 non-industrial[6] civil servants in 1939 (Fry 2000). The British state was evolving from a regulatory to an administrative state, as were many other European countries, during this period.

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During these years, the PSE was consolidated. It had slowly emerged into a clear set of normative principles or ethics guiding the behaviour of civil servants and the decisions they took. The underpinning principles included political neutrality, loyalty, probity, honesty, trustworthiness, fairness, incorruptibility and serving the public (Farnham & Horton 1996a). Although these principles were never enshrined in law (because of its constitutional linkage to the Crown), they had entered the culture of the higher civil service and were gradually transmitted to all levels over the next 20 years.

Furthermore, the civil service became more responsible for policy. The increase in the number of ministries and departments and the extended role of government compelled politicians/ministers to leave more and more aspects of policy to their civil servants and to rely more heavily on them for advice. However, this did not mean that civil servants were taking over ministers' responsibilities. As an adjunct of the state, civil servants were still held accountable for their actions through the principle of ministerial responsibility. This principle was defended on the grounds that civil servants would only give free and honest advice to ministers if their positions were safeguarded. In other words anonymity was the price of permanency

[5] The Whitley system involved the creation of joint consultative committees where representatives of the state as employer and the staff would consider all matters affecting the civil service, including wages and terms and conditions of service, with a view to increased efficiency and the well being of those employed. Whitley councils were set up at the national regional, deapartmenatl and work place level.

[6] The British civil service is divided into non-industrial white collar workers and industrials who are manual and blue-collar workers.

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PSE was further established during this period through a shift in a mix of positive feedback mechanisms. The war led to an expansion of government's peacetime role. This caused a critical juncture in the functional mechanism. After the war, the government faced new demands from different directions. The wartime economy had to be converted and the armed forces had to be demobilised. The immediate consequence was the growth of the civil service (Chester & Willson 1968). This expansion disrupted the power balance over the civil service. There was a relative lack of able ministers to control this evolution and to retain power over the civil service (Brown 1970) and as a consequence new players filled the vacuum. These included Haldane and Fisher. Haldane was a key figure in the development of PSE as he projected an ethical ideal of service to the community, which he associated with the civil service. The common objective of the civil service, he asserted, should be the service of the public in the most efficient form practical. He called for an *espirit d'corps*, which was based on the non-economic motive of self-sacrifice arguing that 'virtue is its own reward' (Haldane 1923).

The Treasury, led by Warren Fisher, was another player that filled in the power vacuum over the civil service. The fact that Fisher remained in control of the Treasury up to 1939 and was also head of the civil service meant that he was able to oversee the gradual standardisation and centralisation of policy and the development of a system of personnel administration throughout the service. He also controlled entry to the higher civil service, which became a 'closed corporation' of generalist administrators.

After this period of rapid change after 1919 there was relatively little change up to the Second World War (Chester & Willson 1968). No further critical junctures occurred as nobody was able to break the power balance that Fisher and Haldane had established, partly because parliament and governments were concerned with other policy issues after the fall of the war-time coalition in 1922. Consequently, the principles of the PSE became institutionalised and were disseminated through the socialisation process and absorbed by a process of osmosis within the service.

7.3 Second World War and post-war consolidation 1945-1960

Once again war acted as a catalyst of change and this time more dramatically and fundamentally than in 1914-18. The economy was quickly put on a war basis with the Churchill government of 1940 taking over responsibility for production, distribution and control of labour. Conscription resulted in many civil servants being 'called up' and new staff from all walks of life being recruited quickly, largely by interview, to fill both vacancies and

new posts. New departments were set up and new departmental classes for specialists were created. The service grew rapidly and attracted men and women of all the talents from the universities, the professions, industry and business.

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Unlike the First World War, the second did not prove to be a critical juncture for the PSE. Although Treasury control had been weakened during the first few years of the war, because of the association of Sir Horace Wilson (successor to Fisher as Head of the Civil Service) with Prime Minister Chamberlain's unsuccessful appeasement policy. However, it was restored when Sir Richard Hopkins took up the joint post of Head of the Civil Service and permanent secretary of the Treasury. Thus, the power balance was restored. Furthermore, the Prime Minister (Churchill) saw no use in disturbing the Civil service and backed the Treasury in fending off reforms (Theakston 1995)

After the war, a radical Labour Government, led by Clement Attlee, was elected in 1945. In addition to nationalising the major industries and introducing a welfare state the government adopted Keynesian economic theory. The latter became the new orthodoxy for the next 30 years and using fiscal and monetary policies governments sought to achieve economic growth, full employment, a stable currency and low inflation. This change in the role of the state led to the creation of new departments and new activities, which required different skills. However, there were no significant changes imposed on the Civil Service either by Labour or Conservative governments during the 1950s. Neither the Labour (1945, 50) nor the Conservative (1951, 55) electoral victories were critical junctures. Atlee anticipated an important role for the Civil Service, but saw no use in reviewing the machinery of government. He had been in the wartime coalition working very close to the civil service, and he liked what he saw. When Churchill returned to power in 1951, he shared similar sentiments (Theakston 1995) as did Eden his successor.

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In fact the end of the war proved to be a missed opportunity to restructure the civil service and retain the skills of the wartime 'irregulars'. Most of them returned quickly to civil society. Although the future of the service was reviewed in 1946, the administrative class closed its ranks against reform (Theakston 1995). The Assheton Report (1944), which recommended a staff college for senior staff, was rejected on the grounds that generalist administrators required only on-the-job training and were developed by job rotation. The old system of recruitment by formal examination was also reintroduced although the wartime practice of recruitment by interview was retained and gradually became the norm. Training for other civil servants was encouraged by the Treasury, which created a Training Division to oversee developments. A combination of skill shortages, new technology and the rapid increase in

work did lead to continual developments in the service but the changes were incremental rather than radical. None of the Labour (1945, 50) or Conservative (1951) electoral victories proved to be critical junctures. Atlee while anticipating an important role for the civil service saw no need to review the machinery of government. He had been in the wartime coalition working very closely with the civil service, and he liked what he saw. When Churchill returned to power in 1951, he shared similar sentiments (Theakston 1995).

After the Suez Crisis (1956), criticisms of the civil service began to surface and series of reports highlighted a lack of skills amongst Treasury staff and a general lack of management skills throughout the service (Plowden 1961) But the PSE and the generalist tradition of the administrative class remained undisturbed in the post-war era. Changes had taken place and the PSE had been reconciled with the interventionist Keynesian/ welfare state. All the changes had been built on the existing arrangement and thus can be seen as an example of layering.

7.4. Civil service under pressure

At the end of the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, criticism of the civil service grew. There were cavilling reports from parliament and academics describing the civil service as consisting of 'sheltered spinsters' and guilty of 'a voluntary exclusion of talent' (Chapman 1958), dilettantes (Balogh 1959) and devoid of management skills (Fabian Society 1964). In 1966, the Labour Government appointed the Fulton Committee in investigate the dysfunctions of the civil service. Fulton argued for a 'new style' civil service based upon a new professionalism, a simplified structure, and the removal of secrecy. Senior civil servants should become good managers and a new Civil Service Department (CSD) should implement the reforms. It was clearly a challenge to the legitimacy of the service and to the power of the administrative class who were incensed by the accusation of amateurism and the challenge to their role as policy advisors.

The government accepted Fulton's proposals with the exception of 'preference for relevance'. It immediately created a CSD, which threatened the power of the Treasury and divided the responsibility for the service between three positions the Permanent Secretary of the Treasury, the Permanent Secretary to the Cabinet and the new Permanent Secretary of the CSD. It instructed the new department to implement Fulton and to quickly reform the structure. A Civil Service College was set up in 1970 but then Labour lost power.

In 1970, the Conservatives replaced Labour and Prime Minister Heath had his own plans for government reform. He issued a white paper *Reorganization of Central Government*, (Cmnd

4506 1970) which set out the future of the civil service as he saw it. He subsequently merged departments into giant, multi-functional departments and introduced new and more rational tools of management. However both the Fulton reforms and the Heath reform proved to be little more than superficial. The elite generalists reacted with particular skill in responding positively to those recommendations which they saw were necessary and which benefited them and allowed to lapse those that they did not agree with. The result was one of continuity and change (Horton 1993; Drewry & Butcher 1988)

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Although the Civil Service was under siege during this period, the PSE hardly changed. In fact, the entire machinery of government hardly changed, as Garrett observed (1980) 'in general, the civil service of 1980 is not much different to the civil service of 1968' (cited in Theakston 1995: 107). Although there was a lot of criticism, the civil service managed to retain a *status quo* concerning the PSE.

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The Fulton report, with its attack on the values of the civil service, was thwarted in part because of a lack of political support. The loss of Wilson's support after the initial changes had been implemented, enabled a coalition of civil servants and mandarins to cooperate against the reforms (Theakston 1995). After the 1970 election, the Fulton Report's death warrant was signed when Heath left its implementation to the civil service itself. Similarly, the *Reorganization of Central Government* never reached its targets for the same reason. The implementation of important elements was left to the Treasury and few ministers wanted to back it within their departments. Despite all the criticisms directed at the civil service, its position of power was never disrupted. The increased unionisation within the civil service also diminished the power of the government over it. Moreover, in 1972, Heath made a U-turn is his economic policy by increasing public spending, because of the bad economic situation (Theakston 1995). Here, a disruption of the functional mechanism turned itself against Heath's reform, in favour of the existing institution.

7.5 The Civil Service from 1979 to 1997

The election of Conservative Government in 1979 under Margaret Thatcher marked a new era for the civil service. In addition to being committed to a radical reform of the public sector she displayed a virulent anti-civil service attitude (Theakston 1995). Thatcher was determined from the outset to gain political control of the civil service, by appointing advisors from business and also filling several key official positions with civil servants that were 'one of us' (Pilkington 1999). She aimed to ' reduce staffing, attack waste and develop new financial and information systems to assist top management, including ministers, and enable managers at every level to be held accountable' (Horton 1996b p 159). She abolished the Pay Review

Body (Fry 1984); took a determined stand in facing down the first major civil service strike in 1981; abolished the CSD, which she saw as representing a vested interest, and engineered the early retirement of the Head of the Civil Service (Bancroft) who had defended the interests of the civil service and supported the strike. During her premiership, the service was reduced by 20 per cent.

The transformation of the civil service unfolded over 18 years of Conservative governments. The first step focused on managerialising the service under the mantra of the 3 Es, economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Sir Derek Rayner, a private businessman, was appointed to spearhead an efficiency drive and to introduce private sector values. In 1982 a Financial Management Initiative (FMI) (Cmnd 8616 1982) was launched (Fry 1984) to improve the allocation, management and control of resources throughout central government (Collins 1987). Progress was slow, however, and was threatening the success of FMI while there had not been any significant change in the dominant values of the Civil Service (Theakston 1995; Pilkington 1999). Some progress had been made with the introduction of performance management and the use of performance indicators (PIs) as instruments of management control and cost cutting (Pollitt 1987) but no paradigm shift had yet occurred.

After their third electoral victory in 1987 the Conservative party's ideas on public management began to crystallize and they embarked upon restructuring. The Next Steps Report (Jenkins *et al* 1988) recommended that executive functions should be carried out by agencies headed by chief executives, responsible for day-to-day management, and operating within a policy framework, objectives and resources set down by the responsible department in consultation with the Treasury. This enabled government to further introduce private sector values and to hive-off important parts of the civil service (Richards 1988). Between 1988 and 1997 over 150 agencies were created and nearly 80 per cent of civil servants were working in them. Nevertheless, the policy core in Whitehall was still in tact.

John Major, replaced Thatcher in 1990, and continued to transform the civil service with the *Citizens Charter* (Cm 1599 1991). The thrust of the Charter was a commitment to responsive and high quality public services with privatisation and competition seen as the means of achieving this. Accompanying the Citizen's Charter was the White Paper *Competing for Quality* (Cm 1730 1991). These two documents marked the start of the government's third stage of reform in steering public management further towards the market. These developments led observers to be very pessimistic about the future of the unified Home Civil Service (Chapman 1992 & 1997; Theakston 1995) and the PSE. .

The response of the civil service to these changes was generally pragmatic. The higher civil servants did not resist changes but sought to influence those policies, which threatened their interests. The then Head of the Civil Service, Sir Robin Butler, argued strongly that it was necessary to maintain a degree of cohesion throughout the service and in particular a common value system (Butler 1993). The Oughton Report (Efficiency Unit 1993) on career development also sought to combine the need to open up the service to outsiders and extend the management competencies of top civil servants whilst staying true to the traditional principles of the civil service.

The government set out its plans for the civil service in a consultative white paper *Continuity and Change* in 1994. This document was widely seen as a victory for the Office of Public Service (successor to the CSD) and top officials in defending their position as mandarins and averting some of the more radical proposals for reform (Massey 1995). Once again there was a commitment to 'sustaining the key principles on which the British civil service is based-integrity, political impartiality, objectivity, selection and promotion on merit and accountability through ministers to parliament (Cm 267 1994:1). The white paper acknowledged that further reforms could only be achieved by a well trained and highly professional group of senior advisors and managers working closely in support of ministers, both in the development of policy and in the management of services. This was to be achieved by the creation of a new Senior Civil Service (SCS) of around 3000 people brought into a new pay and contractual framework. The SCS was subsequently created in 1996.

Meanwhile, the legitimacy of the civil service was severely challenged as a result of the Arms to Iraq Scandal in 1992. The Scott Inquiry, which reported in 1996, revealed deceit and hypocrisy by both ministers and high-ranking civil servants (Barker 1997). Its political impact was less than expected due to both the complex nature of the report and the skilful timing by the government. However, the inquiry did trigger other responses. First, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee issued *The Proper Conduct of Public Business* report (PAC 1994). Second, the Treasury and Civil Service Committee of the House of Commons conducted hearings and produced a report on *The Role of the Civil Service* (HC 1994). Third was the Nolan Committee report on *Standards in Public Life* (Nolan Committee 1995). This included recommendations on ethical standards for MPs, Ministers, Civil Servants and Quasi-Governmental Bodies. It recommended a Civil Service Code of Ethics, in order to preserve the traditional core values of the civil service.

The Government responded in a second white paper *Taking Forward Continuity and Change* (Cm 2748, 1995) by reiterating its commitment to a permanent civil service based on

traditional values and accountable through ministers to Parliament. It rejected the suggestion that standards in the service had fallen as a result of many of the recent changes but it proposed some safeguards. First, it proposed a Civil Service Code, which was subsequently introduced. Second, it extended the powers of the Civil Service Commission to ensure unbiased recruitment. It was however clear that the government intended to pursue its drive for greater efficiency and value for money with further agencification, marketisation, contractorisation, privatisation and the use of business process re-engineering and benchmarking using the Business Excellence model from the private sector.

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During the period of Conservative governments covered above there were a number of challenges to the PSE. First there was the impact of agencification (Greenaway 1995;Theakston 1995; Richards & Smith 2001; House of Commons 2002; Winstone 2003). Agencification fragmented the former unified service and civil servants began to identify with their agency rather than the service itself. This had always been the case with lower level officials working outside of London but began to characterise more senior staff. Agencification also opened the door to outside recruitment and to limited contracts for senior officials. This resulted in a less permanent Civil Service as outsiders tended to stay for short periods and career civil servants began to manage their own careers as they moved in and out of the service (Coxall & Robins 1998). It simultaneously raised questions about the relationship between civil servants and ministers, with the former not protected any longer from the political whims of the latter.

The second challenge came with the managerialisation of the service. From the 1980s senior civil servants had to create a *modus vivendi* between their policy role (which nowadays consists mainly of a gatekeeper's function (Campbell & Wilson 1995) and a managerial role (Theakston 1995; Barberis 1997,1998). The use by ministers of policy advisors and their reliance upon think tanks has curtailed (but not abandoned) the role of senior civil servants as the main source of policy advice. This change of role has implications for the 'long stop' constitutional position of the traditional civil service.

A third challenge, closely linked to the first two, was the introduction of market values into the civil service (Stewart & Clarke 1987; Butcher 1997; Woodhouse 1997; Bevir & Rhodes 2003). Efficiency[7] and quality have become the criteria of evaluation of 'good government'

[7] Efficiency has always been a part of the PSE but not the business economic term that is now universally used. In earlier times, it was linked with equality, propriety and integrity in the equation (Woodhouse 1997)

and equated with performance targets and cost savings rather than equity, fairness, procedure and political sensitivity.

A fourth challenge has arisen from the greater openness and transparency in the service, which has resulted in civil servants losing their anonymity. They are increasingly seen as public figures, called before parliamentary committees, committees of inquiry and often on the media explaining government policies. Open Government has removed much of the secrecy previously associated with the civil service and people now have rights to information and can challenge the actions of civil servants. This increase in personal responsibility of civil servants has weakened the shield of ministerial responsibility although that protection was wearing thin before 1979.

A fifth challenge has been to the unquestioned loyalty to politicians. This has altered in part because of soured relationships between civil servants and their ministers. Several incidents of ‘ naming and blaming’ civil servants serve as an example that ministers are no longer prepared to take up their ministerial responsibility for civil servants (Coxall & Robins 1998). During the Thatcher governments there were also a series of whistle-blowing or leaking incidents, demonstrating how difficult the relationship between the civil servants and the government had become and reflecting in part a clash of cultures. The Ponting affair (Ponting 1986) was only one of several of these incidents questioning the loyalty of civil servants to their political masters and exposing the dilemma facing civil servants when they are asked by the minister to do something which is either illegal or, in their opinion, against the public interest (Chapman 1993;Theakston 1995).

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We will now try to explain these changes by structuring events using our theoretical framework. An increased focus on the management role and the promotion of management values was at first obtained by the process of ‘layering. The implementation of the FMI in 1982 could not capitalise on any critical incidents able to disrupt the positive feedback mechanisms that were still in place within the civil service. The Treasury still remained powerful and was in a position to impose controls on the middle-grade managers implementing the FMI. Although a focus on management became an additional value, FMI could not disrupt the power mechanism and challenge the existing PSE. Meanwhile, the development of IT systems proved to be insufficient to disrupt the institutions utilitarian mechanism. The returns on investment were just too small (Theakston 1995).

The Next Steps Initiative was better at challenging the existing PSE. It promoted agencification, economic liberalism and an even stronger focus on management values. The

third consecutive electoral victory provided the Thatcher government with enough power to start this new initiative. Not only did Thatcher's power increase but also internal opposition weakened. The Treasury could no longer impose controls, as it was part of the reform. In addition, a new type of senior civil servant, more in tune with these values, had risen and union power had been diminished within the civil service. In addition to the shift in the balance of power mechanism, the PSE legitimacy mechanism was more and more out of tune with the prevailing values in society (the Conservative Party had won the election with a manifesto that explicitly stated its values of entrepreneurialism, competition, and the 3Es.). These disruptions caused the Next Steps Initiative to be more challenging to the PSE than the FMI had been.

The Citizen's Charter and Market Testing built on the momentum Next Steps had created. However, they could not take advantage of a new critical incident and further challenge the PSE. Major's position was weak within the cabinet and the accusations of sleaze and political corruption strengthened the position of the civil service. The Oughton report and Continuity and Change white papers demonstrated the Major cabinet was divided on the civil service. The period was characterised by more continuity than change and therefore diminishing even further the capacity to disrupt the PSE. The Arms-to-Iraq scandal and its consequences, on the contrary, moved the focus away from disrupting the PSE to the need of ethical guidelines for civil servants.

The challenge to anonymity, loyalty and secrecy accounts for another instance of disrupted feed back mechanisms. The 1979 election was a first critical incident to sour the relationship between Government and the civil service. It provided Thatcher with enough power to assert her political ascendancy by facing down the 1981 trade union strike, reforming the pay system, abolishing the CSD and banning trade unions in GCHQ. The balance of power was in her favour. This unilateral approach however was a severe blow to the value of mutual loyalty. The anonymity of civil servants and its counterpart, secrecy on governmental and ministerial issues, was disrupted and there were numerous incidents on both sides.

7. 6 The modernised civil service

In 1997, Labour came to power after 18 years of Conservative government. It promised a 'Third Way' of governing between the economic liberalism of the Tories and the state socialism of Old Labour (Mandleson and Liddle 1997; Giddens 1998). Whilst not rejecting the reforms of the Conservative governments its focus was on *better government* through *partnership* between the public and private sectors, more *joined up government* and a

modernisation programme to overhaul the civil service This meant a combination of markets, traditional hierarchy and policy networks, an enhanced coordination capacity under the control of the Prime Minister's Office and the recruitment of an army of political advisors to ensure the government had strong support for their policies. This mirrored in part the Thatcher government's distrust of the civil service but also a lack of confidence in the ability of the service to deliver on the government's commitment to *Better Public Services* (Richards & Smith 2004). The *Modernising Government* (Cm 4310) white paper set out a programme of radical reform of the senior civil service but at the same time acknowledged the importance of the service to the achievement of government policy, The rhetoric was of reinstating the public sector trade unions and working in partnership with them to improve public services.

However, the demand for strengthening and safeguarding the traditional values of the civil service and formally institutionalising them in a Civil Service Act had not abated. In 1998, the House of Lords Public Service Committee echoed the 1994 House of Commons Treasury and Civil Service Committee on the importance and the vulnerability of the traditional PSE (HL 55, 1998). In 1999, the Cabinet Office finally issued the Civil Service Code that everybody had been waiting for but parliament was demanding a Civil Service Act. A Bill was introduced in 2004 for consultation (Cm 6373). It remains to be seen whether the new Labour government elected in May 2005 will reintroduce it in its first parliament.

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*I*n this recent period since 1997, the PSE has undergone two changes. First, there has been a further loss of a policy role for the SCS. Whereas under the previous Conservative governments the SCS combined a management and a policy-role, their role is now primarily one of management. Whenever strategic decisions are made, special advisors from outside the civil service are the main source of policy-advice and civil servant are largely removed from the strategic choice policy-loop (Richards & Smith 2004). Whitehall has become primarily an instrument for implementing and delivering policy.

Second, traditional civil service values and the PSE have become more prominent again. Both during the final years of Major's government and the first two terms under Blair have seen an increased focus on ethical behaviour of civil servants and on the values of impartiality, accountability, trust, equity, probity and service (House of Lords 1998; House of Commons 2002). However, public opinion is not always convinced that these values are actually upheld by civil servants (Committee on Standards in Public Life 2004). They continue to be important as a code of conduct for both the civil service and ministers and remain at the core of the British civil service in spite of the many changes in its structure, composition and

activities, which have taken place over the last 150 years. They are continually being re-institutionalised (Cabinet Office 1999; House of Commons 2002).

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Taking civil servants out of the policy loop began in earnest in 1979. Since 1997 Labour governments have continued the trend and accelerated the process. They have relied on external think tanks but appointed many more special advisors and each minister now has a small *cabinet*. With two consecutive landslide victories and adopting an increasingly presidential style of government Blair was able to gain control of the policy process and disrupt the power between ministers and their senior civil servants. By immediately appointing outside sources of policy-advice into key positions this new balance was institutionalised. In spite of a greatly reduced majority there is no evidence to suggest that this will change in Labour's third administration.

The resurgence of traditional civil service values happened more gradually. The momentum created by public opinion and the media fuelled by the Nolan and Scott reports compelled both the Conservatives and Labour to focus more on the values within the civil service, strengthening its position again. The government publicly committed to 'value the civil service, not denigrate it ' (Cm 4310, p. 13). Incrementally, Labour had to concede a Civil Service Code and a Civil Service Bill, despite Tony Blair's bad experience with reforming the machinery of government (Richards & Smith 2004). Public pressure, parliamentary pressure and the resilience of the SCS disrupted the dismantling of the civil service and forced Blair to revalue the traditional civil service, albeit in a different role.

Conclusion

Our first research objective was to examine the evolution and the current status of PS. Emerging alongside the modern civil service its evolution can be summarised in the words 'continuity and change' which also describes the civil service itself. Throughout history, PSE has been extended to accommodate new values in an effort to adapt it to the situational context (Keynesian thinking in the 1940s or market values in the 1980s and 1990s). Similarly, some values have been removed from PSE as they did not fit the context at the time (Keynesian think in the 1980s or a policy role in the present situation). However, the essential values of the Northcote-Trevelyan philosophy are still part of the core PSE: integrity, political impartiality, objectivity, selection and promotion on merit and accountability.

Along the same lines, the field of application has evolved throughout history. In the early days, the higher civil service was the champion and the locus of the PSE as it came also to reflect the values associated with their elite social and educational backgrounds. However,

gradually, with the growth and unification of the civil service, PSE was disseminated to the lower civil servants. However, agencification disturbed this homogeneity as more and more of the service was fragmented. Nowadays it is not clear at all to whom this ethos applies, as there are so many different types of public servants and it is no longer easy to determine the boundaries of the civil service because of partnerships and contractorisation. However, with the prospect of a Civil Service Act, this problem may recede.

Our second research question referred to the value of historical institutionalism as a framework for explaining institutional change. Looking back on the analysis, we can state that the persistence and disruption of positive feedback mechanisms are able to explain a great deal of institutional change, just as is layering. Especially functional, power and legitimation mechanisms proved to be important in pinpointing causal relationships in this case study. On the one hand, critical junctures, often operationalised as wars or electoral victories, disrupted these mechanisms causing path dependent change. On the other hand, these feedback mechanisms also proved to be responsible for preserving institutional arrangement.

However, there is a significant element we noticed when applying this theoretical framework. This observation is that the utilitarian mechanism was never able to disrupt other positive feed back mechanisms, while conversely the power mechanism explains a large amount of change. This might be due to the fact that the civil service and PSE are elements or sub-systems of a larger political system. It therefore could be argued that in such sub-systems political power prevails over utilitarian motives as the prevailing causal mechanism. This could have important implications for the management of change projects in the civil service. However, based on a single case study, further research is evidently required.

A single case study provides no conclusive evidence of these assertions. Therefore, avenues for further research are wide open. First, the theoretical framework could use more corroboration, especially the feed back mechanisms that Mahoney summed up. In addition, the prevalence of individual mechanism in certain systems can be verified. Second, the theoretical concept of momentum should be further investigated. Third, further empirical research is needed on the present condition of the PSE, as our study is mainly based on secondary sources. First hand quantitative or qualitative studies could provide additional information on its current status.

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